

Applying to be a Mandela Washington Fellow: Common Questions

For each of the past three years, staff from the U.S. Department of State have answered questions from YALI Network members about applying for the Mandela Washington Fellowship for Young African Leaders.

As Network members applicants begin to prepare their applications for the 2017 Mandela Washington Fellowship, we took a look back at some of the common questions we've answered in person on completing the application, the process for applying, and what applicants need to know about the Mandela Washington Fellowship.

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On how Mandela Washington Fellows are selected ...

You have to be a citizen of a sub-Saharan African country and have to be residing in a sub-Saharan African country. You should be proficient in English, and between the ages of 25 and 35 at the time of your application. You should have a proven record of leadership or accomplishment in public service, business/entrepreneurship or civic engagement. We also like to see a demonstrated commitment to public or community service, to volunteerism or mentorship. We are looking for someone who has the ability to work cooperatively in diverse groups and who respects the opinions of others — someone with demonstrated knowledge or experience in the track for which you are applying. The essays and the applications that you submit are very important, because we want to see people who've had a track record of making change and are looking forward to making change as we move forward. One must be energetic and positive. The most important criteria is to have a real commitment to return to Africa and put your new leadership skills into use to benefit your community and country.

On English proficiency ...

We're looking for applicants who have English that is good enough to participate in an academic program in the United States. There is no TOEFL test, but we ask applicants to self-rate their English on their applications. There are also the essays that must be well-written in English. There will be an interview process and we will get a feel for whether you actually can speak English or not. It will become apparent whose English is strong. If you make it to the semifinalist round and are interviewed at the U.S. Embassy or somewhere else in your country, the staff there will of course be holding the interview in English.

On applying from a different country than where you permanently reside ...

We are looking for candidates who are living in sub-Saharan Africa and who are committed to the future of their continent and home country. For the purposes of this program, we don't look at Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt as part of sub-Saharan Africa. Interviews for the Fellowship will be occurring in sub-Saharan Africa. If you are applying in sub-Saharan Africa but in a

different country in sub-Saharan Africa from which you normally reside (maybe you are studying or working in another country), the embassy in the country in which you're currently living will likely be able to do the interview for you and then transmit that back to our embassy in your home country to make a decision.

On setting quotas ...

We value diversity in the United States and hope to reflect this in the Washington Fellowship program. We want a diverse group of countries, ethnic groups, religions, gender, physical, visual, and hearing abilities. We are looking for a diverse group of opinions as well. We are looking for the full range of people who make up African society. We expect to have people participating in this program from every country in sub-Saharan Africa. Ultimately, we want to make sure we have a representative group of individuals from across the continent as a whole.

On what documentation to include with your application ...

The key thing we are looking for is demonstrated leaders. It really is up to you what documents you decide you'd like to upload, so I would just suggest that you pick the documents that you think best reflect either your professional expertise or your leadership capacity. If you have trouble demonstrating that in a documented form because of various reasons outside your control, we would still like to take a look at your application. An important part of the application is the essays where you have the opportunity to demonstrate what you have accomplished and what your goals are for your future.

On which Fellowship track to choose ...

A candidate who has experience in a particular track (Business & Entrepreneurship, Public Management, Civic Leadership) will be a stronger candidate than someone who has never worked in that area. But we welcome all who want to apply, both those who currently work in a particular track and those who have an intention to do so in the future.

On submitting multiple applications and ranking the tracks ...

You cannot submit several applications and it will not improve your chances. If you submit several applications you will be disqualified. Do not submit more than one application.

On the role of educational achievement in the selection process ...

We will consider what your formal education is, but you will not be disqualified if you do not have a formal diploma or degree. Formal education plays a role in terms of how we evaluate your application as a whole. We really are looking for Fellows who are demonstrated leaders in their communities and their countries. Africa is a diverse continent and we know that leaders come to their achievements through both formal and informal means.

On what we expect upon your return to Africa ...

We hope that you bring back new skills and new enthusiasm. What we really hope for is a multiplier effect — that you share with your friends, family and colleagues what you saw, learned, and perhaps taught others in the U.S. so that this experience grows. And we hope that you continue to stay in

touch with us.

Applying to be Mandela Washington Fellow: The Interview, Your Turn to Shine

Prepare for the Interview

1. The key to a successful interview is to answer the question asked, not the question you want to hear or are best prepared for. Be sure to listen to the interviewer carefully in order to hear the full question. Answer the question directly and fully.
2. You will likely be asked a number of questions related to your application. Review your application prior to your interview so that you can be confident and articulate when discussing your responses.
3. Be prepared to explain why you chose your selected program track.

Make a Good Impression

1. Wear business attire.
2. Maintain eye contact. Engage everyone on the selection panel, not just the person asking a question.
3. Greet each person on the selection panel when you enter the interview room and thank each person when you leave.
4. Hold an upright, but not wooden posture. Your body language should indicate engagement, confidence and composure.
5. Beware of nervous habits like fixing your hair, constant smiling, fumbling with your fingers or jewelry, and mumbling or raising your voice.

Respond Thoughtfully to Questions

1. Listen carefully to each question and take time to consider your response so that you can respond both briefly and fully. It is better to pause to think before you answer than to rush into a poorly thought out response . Avoid saying “That’s a good question” as a way to gain time to think.
2. Be honest. If you do not know the answer to a particular question, admit that you do not know.

Credit: AP Images



3. If you don't understand a question, ask for clarification or for the interviewer to rephrase the question. Be sure to fully respond to the question once you understand it.
4. Well-thought out answers are essential to success in interviews. Your responses should give the panel the opportunity to see how you think and how you develop your ideas.
5. Provide specific examples to illustrate your points.
6. Be prepared to be interrupted or cut off. Interviewers may want to shift topics to adhere to time constraints.
7. Be clear, concise and confident in your answers. Avoid speaking non stop for prolonged periods of time, no matter how interesting your story, most people start to lose focus after a couple of minutes
8. Make clear connections between your goals and the goals of the Fellowship in your answers.
9. Prepare a response for an open-ended closing question such as, "Is there anything else you would like to tell the panel?" An answer that is brief, honest, and substantive is best.


Practice

1. Engage friends or colleagues in conversations in which you are challenged to present and support your ideas or interests. Get their feedback. Notice how you make those talking with you feel comfortable and engaged even when the conversation is challenging.
2. Do practice interviews with your friends or colleagues. Some people find it helpful to practice answering common interview questions while looking in a mirror.

Source: Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut

You also may be interested in [The Crucial Job Interview](#) on yali.state.gov.

Applying to Be a Mandela Washington Fellow: Writing a Personal Statement

When you apply for the Mandela Washington Fellowship, you will submit a personal statement  and other essays to introduce yourself to the selection panel. In this part of your application, you can highlight what you want reviewers to know about you.

In any personal essay, it is important to catch the reader's attention with an original, honest statement. When space is limited, it is important to compose a concise answer that highlights the work you are most proud of. Make sure you are responding directly to the question being asked and including examples or anecdotes if relevant.

Here are a few tips to help you write strong personal statements for your application:

- 1) Do not procrastinate! Start preparing your essays. It is easy to underestimate the time and difficulty involved in developing your answers.
- 2) Remember, the written application is the only information the selection panel will have when deciding the candidates who will progress to the interview stage. Do not assume the reviewers know anything about you or the topics you are writing about.
- 3) Reviewers will be reading a lot of applications. Stand out in the crowd by making your responses interesting! One way to do this is to begin your statement with an attention-grabber such as a quote or a story.
- 4) Provide concrete examples that pertain to your life, work, goals and experiences.
- 5) Be concise — do not use a lot of unnecessary words.
- 6) Check for spelling, grammar and punctuation mistakes.
- 7) Make sure your ideas are coherent throughout the essay. The person reading your essay needs to understand how your thoughts fit together.

You also may be interested in [Applying to Be a Mandela Washington Fellow: Building Your Resume](#) on [yali.state.gov](#).

Sources: Worcester Polytechnic Institute in Worcester, Massachusetts; the American Medical Association in Chicago

[Applying to Be a Mandela Washington Fellow: Building Your Resume](#)

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A successful candidate for the Mandela Washington Fellowship demonstrates an ability to get things done. Take a marketing approach to your resume that will command the ultimate amount of attention. Think about how you want the person who reads your resume to think of you.

In preparing your resume, remember three important tips:

1. Keep your answers brief.
2. Write in the third person (do not use the pronoun "I").
3. Proofread your resume for grammatical and spelling mistakes.

Here are a few tips to help you prepare the information you will need for the required format of the Mandela Washington Fellowship resume:

- **Professional Experience:** What professional experiences have you had? Make a list of paid or volunteer positions and summarize your work in these positions to give an instant picture of the breadth of your work or volunteer background.
- **Education:** Have you received any type of formal education beyond secondary school? If so, make a list of the education and training you received from established universities, colleges or trade schools. Include the dates you attended these schools, what you studied, and what degrees or certificates you earned.
- **Professional Training:** Did you receive professional training outside of an established educational institution? Name up to five relevant professional certifications and/or training courses you completed, including the type of training or the name of the certification and the city and country where the training occurred.
- **Community and Volunteer Work:** In addition to your professional experience, do you perform unpaid work in your community? Make a list of your volunteer activities with local charities or NGOs and summarize your work with these organizations.
- **Honors and Awards:** Have you been recognized for your efforts in something that you have done? List what honors or awards you have received, from which organizations, and for what type of work.
- **Professional Skills:** Think about the skills you have acquired over time. What languages do you speak? Are you proficient in computer and software skills?

You also may be interested in reading [Get Your Resume Noticed](#).
